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SUBJECT: AMUR LEOPARD: WORLD'S RAREST BIG CAT AT THE CROSSROADS

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11. (U) Summary: On November 8, 2007 the Consulate helped organize and host a film and lecture dedicated to the plight of the Amur leopard, the world's rarest big cat. The event took place at Vladivostok's Arsenyev Museum. The film, roughly translated as "Forsaken Challenge," noted that one of the major priorities in conserving the animal is the creation of a national park in its territory to preserve vital habitat. Following the screening, Dr. Melody Roelke, a big cat expert from the National Institutes of Health, reported the results of her recent field research on the leopard. According to Dr. Roelke, the results were discouraging. The two leopards of the population of 34 that they trapped and examined exhibited worrying traits, including heart murmurs and reproductive problems - indications of inbreeding. She warned that the Florida panther displayed the same problems before it entirely vanished from the wild a decade ago.

#### Amur Leopard status

12. (U) The Amur leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*) is listed as Category I in the Red Book of Russia, identifying the species as being in the rarest, most critically endangered category. The leopards inhabit an extremely limited range, with the core population in southwest Primorye. It is also included in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List. Male leopards can weigh up to 50kg, females as little as 35kg, and they are of course carnivorous, feeding mainly on deer. The leopard inhabits mixed forest environments and has long fur to withstand the freezing weather. Despite the fact that hunting for leopards has been prohibited since 1956, there are still frequent cases of poaching and even malicious shootings. The thirty-five remaining animals range between Vladivostok and the Sino-Russian border, according to a recent survey conducted by a team of specialists. Their future viability is extremely precarious. The plight of the Amur leopard received renewed focus in mid-April, when a female was found shot and beaten to death. According to investigators, the killing appeared to be particularly senseless: the leopardess was shot through the hindquarters as she was running away from her attacker, and then bludgeoned with a heavy, blunt object.

#### Research efforts of conservation consortium

13. (U) The studies of the Amur leopard population began in the mid-1990's, when a team of Russian and American biologists started fitting leopards with radio collars to obtain information on movements, home range size and habitat needs. Currently, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) monitors population, using cameras set in the forest each winter. This method provides environmentalists with information on leopard distribution and, due to unique spot patterns on the skin of each leopard, photos provide information on individual

movements, population densities, and rates of population turnover. Some Russian researchers, however, object to the use of radio collars, saying it interferes with the leopards' natural navigational abilities. There are also conservationists here who object to introducing any outside leopards into the range to help build up the population and diversify the genetic mix. Although there is evidence that of sperm damage in the Amur leopard population. Since the wild population remained so small for a decade, scientists suspected that inbreeding was taking place, which is a danger, as it causes serious health problems and birth defects, and can ultimately destroy the population.

¶4. (U) Dale Miquelle, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Russian Program described the capture of leopards for veterinary examination as "a milestone in the cooperative efforts to save the Far Eastern leopard from extinction." In 2006, the WCS invited Melody Roelke of the Laboratory for Genomic Diversity, of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S., to conduct a medical exam of Amur leopard. It was for the first time that scientists had an opportunity to run a series of medical and genetic tests, including the collection of sperm to assess reproductive capacity.

¶5. (U) This year, Dr. Roelke, whom the consulate helped to come to Primorye, and the team of scientists continued their field study and spent a month deep in the taiga (Russian Far East wild forests) conducting medical assessments on two leopards which the group was able to capture and tranquilize. The examination, including high-tech ultrasounds and EKG monitoring, proved the scientists' suspicion of inbreeding and reproductive problems, which may contribute to the extinction of species if action is not taken.

#### Important Next Steps

¶6. (U) Plans for Amur leopard conservation include development of a captive breeding center to strengthen the generic diversity

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of the population, and establishment of a second, separate population in the mountains of the southern Sikhote-Alin in Primorye. The conservation consortium intends to begin a new research project in southwest Primorye aimed at collecting detailed data on leopard ecology and their relationship with tigers, as well as with people. Radio-tracking will further help identify movement corridors between Russia, China, and perhaps North Korea, allowing scientists to better link protected areas and strategically position new protected areas. Primorye environmental organizations continuer their educational work with the local population in order to save leopards and their habitat by preventing forest fires and encouraging conservation. Environmentalists say the most effective means of reaching the population is through children, who then exert an influence on their parents. Last year, WWF opened the "Land of the Leopard" visitors' center in the town of Barabash, which hosts groups of schoolchildren who come to learn about Khasan District's animals and habitat. WWF also sponsors the "Leopard Days" festival in September, during which district children celebrate the area's most famous denizens with talent shows, exhibits, drawing contests, and other activities.

#### Administrative barriers on the way of Amur leopard

¶7. (U) Comment: The Amur leopard can be saved from extinction if the present conservation initiatives are implemented, enhanced and sustained. But no efforts of Russian environmentalists and their international colleagues involved in Amur leopard conservation can have success until the Russian national government takes important steps, including creation of a national park in the southwest of Primorye. According to scientists, the national park should unite Kedrovaya Pad', Borisovskoye Plateau, and Barsoviy preserves, covering 727 square miles. The national park, strengthened by federal legislation and a conservation budget would enforce efforts against poaching, environmental poisoning, hunting, illegal

timber harvesting, forest fires, and roads construction. The conservation consortium has been advocating for such a refuge for the last twelve years, but the effort has received no official response in Moscow. Some hope, however, has emerged recently, when in summer 2007, the Russian federal government announced creation of two new national parks, the Zov Tigra National Park in southeast Primorye and Udege Legenda National Park in the central part of the region by 2010. It is notable that First Vice Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov visited the Kedrovaya Pad' nature preserve during his trip to the Russian Far East in September 2007. He promised Park Director Irina Maslova that all necessary administrative decisions will be made to help preserve the world's only wild habitat area of the Amur leopard. According to the official, the Amur leopard, the same as the Amur tiger, are a national endowment and preservation is an affair of state, along with the help provided by charitable organizations and international foundations. "And although this sphere is not within my responsibility. I consider it necessary to provide help in the settlement of these problems," Ivanov said. Post appreciates the support from OES and keen interest in this issue from many quarters of the Department and our colleagues in other agencies involved in conservation and we look forward to supporting future initiatives.

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